

A Cognitive Developmental Approach to Conversation

By Meral Eileli

Teachers are usually aware of the problem ELT students face in conversation classes in putting to use the basic language rules they have learned. Even advanced students seem to have difficulty in spoken interaction; i.e. conversation. Students who have mastered function, form, and vocabulary can often read and write better than they can speak in a foreign language.

One of the most important problems for students who have mastered the basics of grammar seems to stem from the content chosen for conversation classes. Topics such as pollution or the dangers of smoking are not interesting to students. They usually only lead to activities such as gathering data and then presenting them in the classroom. These activities often lack the features of a real life communicative situation.

Free and spontaneous speech activities require ways of stimulating students to converse in a psychologically authentic atmosphere, rather than through ready-made formulas. Students must feel the need to communicate and express ideas and feelings, a process which calls for engaging and thought-provoking material, suitable to the cognitive developmental level of the learners.

Integrating Kohlberg's theory and educational strategies and hypothetical moral dilemmas offer opportunities for authentic material, material which can be used with both children and adults. These dilemmas are open-ended hypothetical problems which present a conflict between the rights, responsibilities, and claims of hypothetical characters. These characters are faced with a situation that the students are asked to resolve. These dilemmas often involve life and death situations that we have all engaged in imaginatively at some time in our lives. As they possess drama and emotional appeal, they meet the criteria for absorbing, thought-provoking content.

Kohlberg (1963) has developed a system for categorizing the moral reasoning of individuals into three levels: *pre-conventional*, *conventional*, and *post-conventional*. As people mature, they move through these stages covering a range of moral development in an invariant sequence. The first level portrays children's highly concrete moral reasoning in finding a solution to a problem. The second level emerges during preadolescence and becomes quite dominant during adolescence. The solutions at this stage usually include abstract issues (ex: what society should expect from its members) and requires reasoning based on beginning formal operations. The third level emerges during adolescence or early adulthood and characterizes the reasoning of only a small number of adults who are able to think in abstract categories and use reasoning based on advanced formal operations. The solutions to the dilemmas develop around the principle of justice; i.e., what would be the fairest solution for all the characters in the dilemma.

Kohlbergian dilemmas can be used with first year English language students. Each dilemma usually takes two class hours. Before presenting the dilemma I arrange the chairs in a circular shape with the teacher in the middle. This arrangement gives each one in the group a chance to

communicate face to face and to use both nonverbal and verbal contact. It also contributes to the friendly atmosphere necessary for interaction.

I usually present the dilemma such as the following Heinz quandary by reading it twice at normal speed.

In Europe, a woman is near death from a special kind of cancer. There is one drug that the doctors think might save her. It is a form of radium that a druggist in the same town has recently discovered. The drug is expensive to make, but the druggist is charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and is charging \$2000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, goes to everyone he knows to borrow the money, but he can get together only about \$1000, which is half of what it costs. He tells the druggist that his wife is dying and asks him to sell the drug cheaper or let him pay later. The druggist says, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz is desperate and considers breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.

(Colby, 1979: Form A)

After the reading, the first step involves identifying and clarifying the dilemma. To do this the students must clarify their own notions of justice. This discussion almost always turns into a warmup exercise. The teacher can use the warmingup activity as an opportunity to create a positive and accepting classroom atmosphere. This is the time students have a chance to communicate their thoughts in a classroom where they will be listened to without fear of criticism. This also might be the first opportunity for many students to think about issues which they have heard but not really thought about.

The second step involves reading the first part of the first question to the students. "Should Heinz steal the drug?" The students are asked to form three groups according to their answers: Those who think Heinz should steal the drug, those who think he should not, and those who cannot decide. Grouping helps students feel comfortable since it is easier to develop a sense of trust and cooperation in small groups. There can be more than one group within each group according to the number of students in the classroom. Next, dictate the remaining questions of the dilemma.

1. Should Heinz steal the drug? Why or why not?
2. If Heinz doesn't love his wife, should he steal the drug for her? Why or why not?
3. Suppose the person dying is not his wife but a stranger. Should Heinz steal the drug for a stranger? Why or why not?
4. Suppose it is a pet animal he loves. Should Heinz steal to save the pet animal? Why or why not?
5. Why should people do everything they can to save another's life?
6. It is against the law for Heinz to steal? Does that make it morally wrong? Why or why not?

7. Why should people generally do everything they can to avoid breaking the law? How does this relate to Heinz's case? (Colby, 1979: Form A)

Each group discusses and writes down the reasons in answer to the questions of the dilemma. During this discussion the groups often revert to the native language; however, this usually indicates that the students are enjoying the task and that they are bringing in their own knowledge and experience, thus personalizing the task. They are then asked to formulate and write down their reasons in English. The teacher is there to facilitate.

What to Expect

Kohlberg's research in psychology has shown that our conception of justice-what is right-changes and develops over time as we interact with our environment. Students at the pre-conventional level approach a moral problem from the concrete interests of the individuals involved in a situation. Their concerns will be whether Heinz will be punished for stealing and whether he will be able to live without his wife.

Students at the conventional level approach a moral problem as a member of society and take into account what the group or society expects an individual to do within its moral norms. The students' considerations at this level will focus on 1) whether a loving husband would do whatever he could to save his wife, 2) whether he could get help from the authorities and what would happen to society if all its members broke the laws. The concern is to protect society as well as one's own interests.

At the post-conventional level a moral problem is considered from an above society perspective. The person at this level sees beyond the current laws and norms of society and thinks about the principles upon which a just society can be based. In relation to Heinz's dilemma, the person at the post-conventional level will consider whether the attempts to save a life would be interpreted as breaking the law. Another consideration would be to decide what kind of system could both prevent the loss of innocent life and protect the druggist's right to property.

Discussion

The classroom presentation of the dilemma and the students' recording of their answers usually takes one class hour. The next class hour is dedicated to the discussion of the questions, one by one, by the whole class. During the discussion I try to ensure equal participation among group members and to help students acquire the confidence to develop, express, and value their own responses. Students experience the delight of encountering their own thoughts expressed by their friends and also find the same situations viewed in a totally new unexpected light or perspective due to their being at different stages of moral development.

During this process I try to encourage students to find each other's perspective along with the perspectives of the people in the dilemma since role-taking is a prerequisite to the development of moral thinking. I also ask abstract philosophical questions such as, "Why are laws made? On what basis should one decide whether a law is just or unjust? If one decides to break a law intentionally, does a person have a responsibility to accept the consequences?" These questions invite students to explore the reasons behind their views and to interact with their classmates in a way that challenges their reasoning.

The use of Kohlbergian dilemmas leads to interactional encounters, which is the center of conversation, and stimulates the negotiation between participants, fostering development of student skills in the areas of reasoning, communicating, listening and questioning. Students try to overcome the linguistic obstacles enthusiastically because fluent language use turns into a means, not an end, and the conversation lesson becomes a living experience of communication rather than another boring class hour.

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